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C O N F I D E N T I A L OUAGADOUGOU 000187

DEPT FOR AF/W DORSEY LOCKHART

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2019

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SUBJECT: DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS IN BURKINA FASO IN 2010 AND BEYOND

Classified by Charge d'Affairs Samuel C. Laeuchli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In the next three to five years, Burkina Faso's fledgling democracy has the potential to make significant progress. Priority areas include: merging and strengthening the numerous weak and fragmented opposition parties; increasing the capacity of political parties to conduct campaigns through training and access to resources; improving the education of the electorate; and enhancing freedom of the media. While the government and political parties must make many of these improvements on their own, opposition parties and the media would also benefit from enhanced training. While any short-term improvements will not significantly impact the 2010 presidential elections, they will be key for the elections in 2015. All advancements will be for naught, however, if President Blaise Compaore decides to change the constitution and run for re-election in 2015. At this point, only Compaore knows what he will do. End Summary.

Burkina's weak and fragmented opposition

12. (C) There are currently no less than 130 different, active, political parties in Burkina Faso. Political leaders agree that the numerous parties are a serious impediment to increasing the power and influence of any individual opposition group. Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that much of the "opposition" actually supports the President and his policies although they are not officially aligned with the ruling party, the Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP). The Alliance for Democracy and Federation/African Democratic Rally (ADF/RDA) is the second largest party in Burkina after the CDP. While the ADF/RDA considers itself to be the major opposition party, it supports the President 99 percent of the time and is included in Compaore's government. Of the 38 opposition members elected to the National Assembly in 2007, 25 are known to be closely aligned with President Compaore and/or the ruling CDP, leaving only 13 true opposition members.

13. (U) The large number of parties means that public resources for campaign finance and for establishing party offices throughout the country are potentially very limited. However, in order to qualify for public campaign financing, parties must have earned at least five percent of the votes in the last election. Therefore, only the CDP and ADF/RDA now qualify for public funding. While the National Independent Commission for Elections (CENI) and National Assembly are considering lowering this requirement to three percent, such a change would still only allow five parties to receive funding. Currently, the CDP has a stronghold on all areas of politics within Burkina Faso because it benefits from significant government funding and it benefited from pre-Compaore political infrastructures, making it the only party with active political leadership in each of the country's 45 provinces.

14. (C) In recent years, several opposition groups have combined their efforts, forming coalitions to prepare for elections. Of these groups, the most promising for the future is the left-leaning Sankarist coalition. This group of parties supports the socialist-era principles of the former Burkinabe President, Thomas Sankara. Among the Sankarist parties, the most prominent is the Union for Rebirth/Sankarists Movement (UNIR/MS) party. Benewende Sankara, UNIR/MS leader and former presidential candidate, told Poloff that, pending discussions at their March, 2009 planning conference, the Sankarists will select a common candidate for the

2010 Presidential elections. Unfortunately, coalition groups in Burkina Faso have historically had a short lifespan, eventually returning to the same fragmented parties that existed before they were merged.

Burkina's uneducated electorate

15. (C) Another fundamental problem that must be addressed in the coming years is that of literacy and civic education for the general population. Mahama Sawadogo, the leader of the CDP in the National Assembly, was particularly concerned about the impact of education on democracy in Burkina Faso. In 2007, the World Bank estimated that over 70 percent of Burkina's population was illiterate. Sawadogo personally estimated that this number was even higher -- closer to 90 percent. He commented that due to literacy problems, the electorate is often manipulated, particularly in rural areas, which has led to election fraud. Sankara, of UNIR/MS, told Poloff that the general population does not even understand the purpose of voting, and those that do vote do not understand the harm of participating in fraud, such as accepting payment for their votes. The problems worsen when cultural norms permit men and local chiefs to dictate their spouses' and villages' votes. In previous elections, opposition groups have accused the CDP of buying votes and tampering with ballot boxes by manipulating these societal weaknesses. In a similar vein, Sankara believed that improving voter education will increase the transparency of the elections and will enable parties to campaign according to their platforms rather than personal relationships or bribes.

In Preparation for 2010 Presidential elections

16. (C) In order to make progress, ADF/RDA and UNIR/MS members agreed that opposition parties will need: (1) to greatly alter their strategies for developing coalitions and seeking support from the public; (2) training; and (3) resources they can use to create political bases throughout the country. The government and political opposition groups must work together to improve campaign practices and to allow opposition groups to have access to public funding. The overwhelming influence and resources accessible to the CDP are additional obstacles the opposition must overcome. According to Sawadogo, comparing the CDP to opposition parties is "like comparing David and Goliath." While opposition and CDP members did not specifically comment on the 2010 presidential candidates to Poloff, they implied that President Compaore is widely expected to run, and to win with a sweeping majority.

Prospects for 2015 elections

17. (C) In 2015, Compaore could decide to run again by amending the constitution, or he could step aside and groom one his supporters and/or advisors to run as the CDP candidate (with support from smaller allied parties). In 2000, President Compaore and the CDP altered Burkina Faso's constitution limiting the presidential mandate to two terms of five years. In 2005, following a petition from UNIR/MS leader Benewende Sankara, the constitutional court ruled that the 2000 amendment was not retroactive, thereby legitimizing Compaore's candidacy in 2005 and allowing him to run again in 2010 despite the fact that he has been in office since 1987. Compaore won the 2005 elections with an overwhelming majority of the votes. The remaining votes were divided between thirteen other candidates, who each received between five and less than point five percent of the votes.

18. (C) Comment: While the outcome of the 2010 Presidential election is not entirely a 'fait accompli,' significant democratic development is not a short-term proposition. The real focus for Burkina's opposition will be the 2015 elections. With political will from the sitting government, the ruling party and opposition leaders, and input from the international donor community, Burkina Faso can make significant progress between now and 2015 by training politicians, the media, and the public in democratic values and basic education. Opposition leaders must also commit to work together, at time

relinquishing their leadership roles to form solid and sustainable coalition groups.

¶9. (C) Comment cont'd: Ultimately, the major factor for the 2015 elections will be whether Compaore decides to run. Within the national government, he faces few obstacles to changing the constitution. While he seems to care deeply about international opinions, Compaore's (or his supporters') desire to remain in power could outweigh any concerns about his image in the international community. U.S. initiatives such as the National Democratic Institute Project to strengthen the capacity of political parties (scheduled to start this year) and future projects to train the media will influence the progress of democracy in the face of these challenges. Ultimately, the litmus test for Burkina's democracy will be on the road to 2015 and not in 2010.

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